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## **See No Evil, Hear No Evil: Senior Leaders' Social Comparisons, and the Low Salience of Racial Issues**

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# **See No Evil, Hear No Evil: Senior Leaders' Social Comparisons, and the Low Salience of Racial Issues**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Four hypotheses are proposed and tested to investigate the role of social comparison as an influence on the extent to which racial issues are salient to senior military leaders. Working from an informational interdependence perspective, it is argued that by virtue of their demographic and hierarchical isolation, senior military leaders rely on social comparison to make assessments of the racial climate in their units. For a variety of reasons, these subjective social comparisons are favorable, reducing the salience of racial issues for senior leaders in their units. Test of hypotheses using factor analysis, correlations, and regression techniques confirmed the presence and predicted influence of social comparison. Recommendations are offered for intervention.

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**Opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and should not be construed to represent the official position of DEOMI, the military Services, or the Department of Defense**

## **Introduction**

One of the major responsibilities of a chief executive officer (CEO) is to manage the morale of the company's work force. That responsibility is important because morale has an influence on productivity and turnover rates. Unfortunately for the CEO, management of morale is often done from a distance, through others who channel information to the CEO. That sometimes happens because of the size of organizations, and very often happens because of the extraordinary demands on the CEO's time. Time is often taken up with responsibilities that make it difficult for the CEO to be in direct contact with "line workers." All this is also true for the CEOs who in the military are senior leaders -- Navy and Coast Guard captains and admirals, Air Force, Army and Marine Corps generals.

Like other CEOs, as part of managing morale, senior military leaders must manage the complex issues of race and gender relations. Management of race and gender relations has the major goal of ensuring equal opportunity between race and gender groups. Whether they are aware of it or not, senior military CEOs are trying to manage, then, a system of procedural interdependence.

Personnel systems of all types are systems of procedural interdependence. Procedural interdependence refers to a social system in which groups are linked to each other by decision-making procedures. In such a system, the decision-making procedures influence the outcomes available to the groups. Those procedures then influence in what way groups' outcomes are dependent on each other, or interdependent.

Procedural interdependence exists, however, at both a material (or objective) and psychological (or subjective) level (Nacoste, 1996; Nacoste & Hummels, 1994). All CEOs including senior military leaders, are attempting to manage both these dimensions of their personnel systems. Management of the material level involves setting up policies that ensure equal opportunity for all groups, as well as meeting requirements imposed by outside agencies. Management of the psychological dimension requires establishing policies that meet the subjective standards of the groups affected by the policy, so "as to encourage the continuation of productive exchange...." between groups (Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Both these management goals are greatly affected by procedures.

To "line workers," CEOs and senior leaders are often perceived as being out of the loop, and so their ability and even motivation to meet these management goals may often be doubted. Senior leaders, it seems, although fair-minded, may not fully understand whether any action needs to be taken, or if there is a need, what action should be taken to meet the material and psychological management goals. The work reported in this paper was undertaken to develop some formal hypotheses about why senior military leaders may not fully understand how to manage the system of procedural interdependence, as it bears on race and gender relations within their units or agencies.

## Two Social Psychological Hypotheses

When it comes to getting authentic information, senior military leaders are faced with certain situational impediments. As with social systems, informational systems are systems of interdependence. That means that the flow of information in these systems is not linear, but dependent on how a person is structurally linked to others. For example, senior leaders are linked to others in the information system in hierarchical fashion. Whereas line workers have co-workers who are on the same hierarchical level, and with whom they have mutual dependence, by contrast senior leaders are less likely to have someone with whom they are mutually dependent. That structure of relationships for the senior leader in the information system of interdependence suggests two possible structural sources that might be influencing the information that senior leaders receive on racial and gender tensions: a demographic isolation source, and a social comparison source.

### Demographic and Hierarchical Isolation

Demographic isolation refers to a set of background factors that combined with a leadership position, keeps a person out of the direct flow of information. Where the information in question regards issues of race and gender, certain demographic characteristics of senior leaders may isolate those leaders from the relevant information flow. Those demographic characteristics would include the race of the leader. Being white might make a person less likely to perceive racial concerns, whereas those who are nonwhite might find them to be obvious. When race comes together with education level and rank, an individual might be very unlikely to ever receive authentic reports about racial matters in the unit. For example, highly educated, high-ranking, whites would be in a structural niche in the information system that would be isolated from that kind of information. Nonetheless, given the institutional pressure to have a unit where racial and gender tensions are low, these individuals would have to have some way of satisfying their need for information on these matters.

Hypothesis I: Senior leaders fit a demographic profile that isolates them from information about racial issues in their units.

### Social Comparison

When an individual has no objective way of gauging reality, they turn to subjective social comparisons to reduce their uncertainty. This concept comes directly from Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison. If senior leaders fit a demographic profile that isolates them from the information they need, they will turn to some other source for that information.

For senior leaders, the problem is that they are required to monitor and improve race relations in their units, in order to maintain a high level of mission readiness. Under those circumstances, senior leaders need objective information about those matters.

Unfortunately, given their demographic and hierarchical isolation, senior leaders are less likely to get this information. Given those circumstances, it follows from Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory that senior leaders will rely on social comparison to reduce the anxiety they experience about monitoring and managing racial issues in their units.

Hypothesis II: Demographic isolation causes senior leaders to rely on social comparison as a source of information about racial issues in their units.

### Types of Social Comparison

What possible social comparisons might senior leaders use in response to their demographic and hierarchical isolation? Although a variety of social comparisons are possible, upward and downward for example, it is most likely that social comparisons with similar others will occur. That would mean that senior leaders would cognitively conceptualize how others like them would evaluate and respond to the situation. Given, however, that the point of reference here is senior leaders, there is another, non-contradictory, possibility.

Senior leaders are attempting to manage a policy mandate. As such, the theory of procedural interdependence is particularly applicable. That theory implies, among other things, that there is a social psychological link between the nature of the problem and the procedures that exist in the organization's system of policies and procedures. Attempts to comply with a policy statement will motivate a search for information. Those cut off from relevant information by demographic and hierarchical isolation will then likely use what they think about related policies and procedures as a social source of information. In the case of senior military leaders, that would mean that these leaders would use their own evaluation of the fairness of general personnel systems to evaluate the legitimacy of claims of racial concerns.

Hypothesis III: For senior leaders, two forms of social comparison will be found to be related to the salience of racial issues; general social comparison and system fairness.

### Social Comparison Consequences

Generally, although it can reduce anxiety, social comparison does so without reliance on objective information. What consequence will the identified social comparisons have on the salience of racial issues among senior leaders? General social comparison, because it uses similar others as a source, should reduce the salience of racial issues among senior leaders. Why? Similar others will, in this case, be similarly situated, that is demographically and hierarchically isolated. That being the case, the social comparisons are being made with individuals who themselves have little experience with racial issues, and thus little sensitivity to what they involve and how they influence people psychologically. For similar reasons, use of evaluations of general systems will also lead senior leaders to assume that when it comes to race, things are basically going well.

Again, if senior leaders fit a particular demographic profile, and given that they have traversed the system so successfully, they will have very little reason to question the operation of the system. As a consequence, they will tend to judge the general personnel systems to be fair, and for them that will reduce the possibility that there are racial problems being created by the system.

Hypothesis IV: The general and systems social comparisons used by senior leaders will reduce the salience of racial issues.

Preliminary test of hypotheses I-IV will be conducted with responses from the Senior Leader Equal Opportunity Climate Survey (SLEOCS).

### **Method**

Senior military leaders' views of equal opportunity in the armed forces may be unique. With that in mind, the Senior Leader Equal Opportunity Climate Survey (SLEOCS) was constructed by the staff of the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI)(See Appendix). From the survey, items for the test of hypotheses to be conducted were drawn from the 18 demographic items, the 25 items to measure Equal Opportunity perceptions in general, the 16 items to measure perceived seriousness of equal opportunity issues, and from 24 items taken from the Military Equal Opportunity Climate Survey (MEOCS) scales. Except for the demographic items, a 5-point Likert item format was employed.

For these preliminary tests of the newly specified hypotheses (I-IV), the decision was made to focus only on active-duty personnel. That being the case, all others were eliminated from the analyses reported, leaving N=671. These participants were mostly white (93 %), male (88 %), between 46 and 55 years of age (92 %), and held a graduate degree (91 %).

### **Factor Analysis**

Although all of the responses to the SLEOCS had previously been factor analyzed, that factor analysis was not directed by specific psychological hypotheses. That factor analysis was conducted with all of the items included in one factor analysis to capture clustered variance across all surveyed responses. The analysis yields a number of general factors.

In the present case, the hypotheses are much more directed. Consequently, a specific "psychological" factor analysis was conducted using small sets of items, making the statistical assumption that within each survey item set, there will be unique clustering that is based on psychological dimensions of the responses.

### **Factor Analysis Predictions**

Items 19-43 of the SLEOCS were designed to assess a variety of perceptions of equal opportunity issues in the military. Following from the procedural-interdependence perspective developed above, it is expected that, at minimum, items 41-43 would cluster. Theoretically those items reflect “general system procedural fairness.” If those items were to cluster, as expected, then there would be support for the approach and an empirical starting point for further analyses.

Items 44-59 were designed to assess the psychological salience of racial and gender problems in the military. Here, it is expected that a factor analysis would show clusters such that racial and gender problem saliences are relatively independent.

### Correlation Analysis

On the face of it there were two items that seemed good candidates for use as indicators of general social comparison. Item 60 had to do with the respondent’s (i.e., the senior leader’s) judgment of how “most people” would rate equal opportunity in the respondent’s Service or agency. Item 61 was the respondent’s personal rating of the same. A high correlation between these two items would suggest, theoretically, that senior leaders were using some “generalized other” as a source through which to judge how their units were doing when it comes to equal opportunity.

## Preliminary Statistical Analysis

### Identification of Theoretical Dimensions

General Systems Fairness: Items 19-43 were subjected to principle components factor analysis with varimax rotation. Using 1.0 as the minimum acceptable eigenvalue, six clusters were extracted from the responses, accounting for 55.2 percent of the variance in responses to these items. Results of this factor analysis were consistent with expectations. Most importantly for the theory guiding this research, items 40-43 clustered together; eigenvalue= 3.7, accounting for 14.8 percent of the variance. Together these items seem to reflect the hypothesized “general systems procedural fairness,” with items such as “The discipline system in my Service or agency is fair to all groups,” and “The promotion system in my Service or agency is fair to all groups.” Also included in this cluster was item 40, which reads “EO issues are generally handled equitably in my Service or agency.” Inclusion of that item in the “general systems fairness” cluster provides preliminary support for the major hypothesis that evaluations of general systems procedural fairness is the inferential lens through which command level personnel evaluate equal opportunity programs.

Salience of Racial Problems: Separately, items 44-59 were subjected to a principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation. With eigenvalue acceptability set at 1.0, four factor clusters were identified, explaining 75.8 percent of the variance. Given the conceptual direction of the work of most interest was item cluster one which clearly was salience of racial, majority-minority problems. That cluster included items where the

respondent is to evaluate the seriousness of a problem in the relationships between “Black (African-American) and white members,” “Hispanic and white members,” etc. It is certain that this cluster is only racial, since separate item clusters captured both general gender issues (i.e., various combinations of men and women) and gender discrimination (i.e., “Sexual harassment,” and “Sexism or gender discrimination”).

General Social Comparison: Senior leaders’ personal ratings of the equal opportunity climate, and their judgment of how “most other people” would rate the climate were correlated. That analysis showed the two items to be highly correlated ( $r = .78$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The items were then combined to create an index for “general social comparison.”

## **Major Results**

Hypothesis I was that senior leaders are demographically isolated, or insulated from information that should make racial concerns and incidents salient. With that in mind, the demographic backgrounds of respondents were analyzed. Consistent with the hypothesis, those analyses show that senior leaders fit in a certain socio-demographic profile.

Senior leaders were found to be mostly male (92.3%), mostly white (93.4%), 46 to 55 years of age (88.5%), and with college degrees (99.6%). Individuals in this profile are much less likely than others to have seen or experienced racial discrimination. And indeed, other data from the SLEOCS show this precisely. Among active-duty senior leaders, 88.7 percent have not experienced discrimination by military personnel, and 84.2 percent have not experienced discrimination by civilian personnel.

Hypothesis II states that the identified demographic isolation will cause senior leaders to use more social psychological sources of information to gauge racial concerns. There are two problems with this hypothesis. First, it is a motivational hypothesis, and the dynamics of motivation are subject to precise identification with the present data. Second, it is a causal hypothesis, again not testable with the present data, which were collected through a cross-sectional methodology that does not allow for a direct test of causal relationships.

With those problems noted, it was still worthwhile to check for a relationship between the demographic characteristics of the respondents and the two types of social comparison identified. Should a relationship be found, that would be taken as an indication of the influence of demographic features on motivation to use social comparison. Results of separate hierarchical regression analyses for general social comparison and general systems fairness provided evidence that demographic isolation did influence senior leaders to use social comparison. General social comparison was predicted by pay grade ( $B = .15$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and by age of the senior leader ( $B = .10$ ,  $p < .009$ ). Likewise, general systems fairness was predicted by pay grade ( $B = -.09$ ,  $p < .02$ ) and age of the senior leader ( $B = .11$ ,  $p < .005$ ). Thus hypothesis II was indirectly



confirmed, with the evidence indicating that demographic factors were linked to the two types of social comparison. This indirect confirmation was useful as part of the network of logical relations that led to hypothesis III.

Hypothesis III stated that two forms of social comparison would be empirically identified: general social comparison and (evaluations of) general system fairness. Correlational and factor analytic work reported above did identify these forms of social comparison in the responses of senior leaders.

In addition, further analyses showed that the two forms of social comparison were significantly correlated with each other ( $r = .41$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Given their placement in the survey, and their lack of common-sense connection, that these two sets of responses correlate at all suggest that they share a conceptual link. Since, however, the level of correlation was modest, the two were treated independently.

Hypothesis IV indicated that general social comparison and general systems fairness would predict salience of racial issues, such that the more positive these responses, the lower the salience of racial issues. This hypothesis was investigated through the use of hierarchical multiple regression analysis.

As shown above, salience of racial issues exists in a separate, independent cluster. That cluster was subjected to hierarchical multiple regression analysis. Demographic variables, and the two types of social comparison were used as independent variables to test the hypothesis that social comparison influences the salience of racial issues for senior leaders. That regression confirmed the hypothesis. A significant regression model was obtained using these variables as predictors ( $F(5,661) = 14.5$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .09$ ). Only the two types of social comparison were significant predictors of the salience of racial issues: general social comparison ( $B = .26$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and general systems fairness ( $B = .11$ ,  $p < .008$ ).

Having established that social comparison is a significant predictor of the extent to which for senior leaders, racial issues are salient, it is important to make note of the direction of this influence. Hypothesis IV indicates that social comparison should reduce salience. And indeed, that is what the analysis shows. In all cases, the beta-weight is positive. Given the coding of the social comparison indicators and the coding of the indicators of racial issues salience, the positive beta-weight means that as social comparison information indicates more positive evaluation, salience of racial issues is lowered. For instance, as general social comparison indicates that when a senior leader says that “like others, I” evaluate the equal opportunity climate in my service as “very good,” that senior leader is more likely to report that racial relationships in their Service are “no problem at all.” The same holds for general systems fairness social comparison. When systems are evaluated as fair by a senior leader, that senior leader perceives that racial relationships are “no problem at all.” In both instances, social comparison reduces the salience of racial issues. That can be said with some confidence because, to begin with, responses are skewed towards low salience.

## Discussion

What factors might make it less likely that racial issues will be salient to senior leaders? One obvious hypothesis is racial prejudice. Here the claim would be that senior leaders, who are mostly white, carry overt or covert racial prejudice that blinds them to racial inequities.

Another possibility, however, is that there are background factors that do not cause racial prejudice, per se, but that make discrimination less cognitively available as an explanation for racial inequities. It could be, for example, that some senior leaders have no personal experience as victims of discrimination. Being without such a personal experience should reduce the salience of discrimination as a social force, and thus reduce the availability of discrimination in the individual's cognitive system. Analyses conducted for this report showed that most senior leaders surveyed indicated they had no experience with discrimination.

If the experience of discrimination increases the cognitive availability of discrimination as an explanation for events, then command level personnel are much less likely to explain (even) clear racial disparities in terms that rely on the concept of discrimination. Senior leaders would, according to hypotheses I and II, imagine how some similar, generalized other would evaluate the situation and search for an explanation in the procedural systems linked to the racial disparities. Both cognitive strategies, however, would be unlikely to include, or include only at a very low level, the concept of discrimination as an available explanation. Having searched for a reference point in general social comparison and through the general procedural systems, senior leaders would judge the alleged racial event through the lens of their evaluation of the general procedural systems. If those systems are judged to be working fairly, then the alleged racial incident will be discounted in racial terms.

It was with this set of logically connected propositions that the work reported in the current study was undertaken. Four interrelated hypotheses were subjected to preliminary tests. Those preliminary tests confirmed the hypotheses and the underlying set of connected propositions. The evidence suggests, then, that the salience of racial issues among senior level personnel is largely influenced by their demographic isolation and the consequent social comparisons they use to gauge the racial climate in their units.

Demographic isolation and the reliance on social comparison that this isolation seems to motivate in senior leaders are a problem because together they cause senior leaders to ignore, or discount, the voices of those who are closest to the problems--rank and file personnel. Dansby (1998) has shown that there is a discrepancy between senior leaders' and rank and file personnel's evaluation of the equal opportunity climate in their units. While the rank and file are generally positive, senior leaders are much more optimistic than the rank and file. Now there is evidence that this optimism may not be rooted in any hard data, but is primarily based on the two types of social comparison that senior leaders' use to reduce their anxiety about race relations. As a consequence, senior

leaders are at risk of being taken by surprise and caught off guard by some racial dynamics that finally come to the fore through some extreme event. And it would take an extreme event even to get their attention since, because of their own social comparisons, senior leaders are desensitized to seeing racial events as racial events.

What can be done to cause senior leaders to pay more attention to the concerns expressed by the personnel in their units? Breaking the “mesmerizing power” of social comparison as it operates in emergency situations is most readily accomplished through training. Once people are aware to how social comparison inhibits actions that they would normally take to help others, social comparison has less power. Senior leaders then should be trained. Given the root cause of their reliance on social comparison, demographic and hierarchical isolation, senior leaders should be trained to use sources of information that are not so isolated. Unlike senior leaders, Equal Opportunity Advisors are not isolated from information about racial climate issues in their units. Quite the contrary, Equal Opportunity Advisors receive a great deal of information about the command’s racial climate. Given where Equal Opportunity Advisors sit in the structural flow of information, senior leaders should be trained to use their Equal Opportunity Advisors as a “divining rod” to ascertain the true racial climate of their units.

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